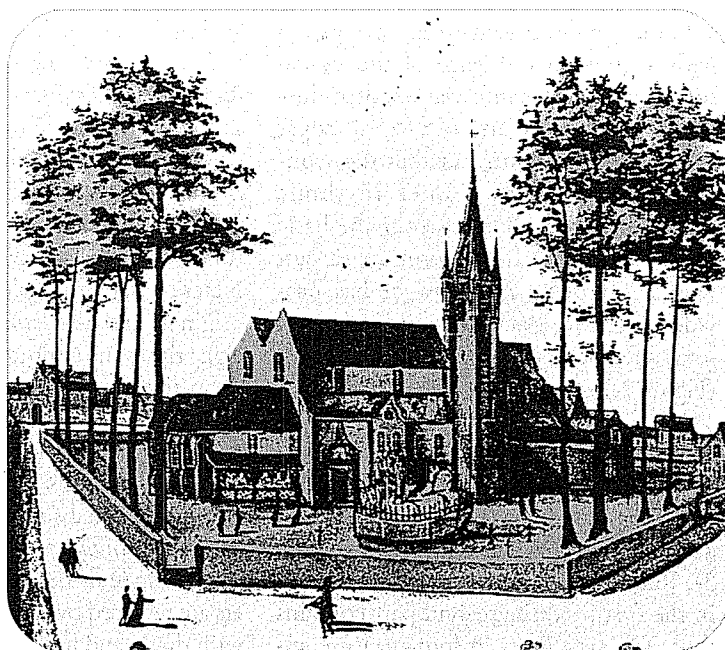


# Dating Josquin's Enigmatic Motet *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix*

by Leslie Clutterham



Most modern analyses of Josquin's miniature masterpiece *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix* have focused on the text and music of only the first part of the motet. The *secunda pars*, difficult to classify stylistically, has been largely ignored. This article reconciles various analyses in the context of the entire motet and offers some new theories regarding the date and circumstances of its composition, as well as biographical information about its composer.

## Early Analyses

*Illibata Dei virgo nutrix* is included in the complete works of Josquin begun by Albert Smijers in the early part of this century. Smijers and other early analysts dated *Illibata* among Josquin's earliest works, a group largely composed of motets composed before 1500.<sup>1</sup> It is a five-voice Marian motet with a tenor cantus firmus. It sets two rhymed verses, which Josquin also authored.<sup>2</sup> Howard M. Brown notes that Josquin's nonliturgical, non-Biblical verse may indicate that it was "intended for performance in ritual or votive services in royal chapels or collegiate churches."<sup>3</sup>

## *Prima pars*

The first section of the motet comprises two sentences, each divided into six lines of two AAB rhyme patterns (Figure 1). The first six lines are governed by the "ix" rhyme, the "A" rhyme at which all cadences are on G. Although the phrasing

remains clear, Josquin elides the ends and beginnings of these lines after the initial thematic statement. In the second six lines of the *prima pars*, he no longer uses the "ix" rhyme, and he runs the lines together. The musical phrases no longer correspond to entire poetic lines, and the phrasing becomes blurred as the *prima pars* concludes.

A three-note *cantus firmus*, consisting of descending and ascending fourths (D–A–D or G–D–G), is expressed in perfect longs, stated three times in the tenor. The first section of the motet has a meter signature of *tempus perfectum*, and each entry is preceded by rests of six perfect longs' duration, so that the rests equal three times the value of the *cantus firmus*.

One of the primary determinants of the piece's chronological classification by scholars has been its long opening lines in imitation between vocal pairs, styled in the tradition of Dufay

Leslie Clutterham is Choral Director at Azusa High School and Slauson Middle School, Azusa, California, and at the Monte Vista Unitarian–Universalist Congregation, Montclair, California.

	Rhyme Scheme
Illibata Dei virgo nutrix,	a
Olympi tu regis o genitrix,	a
Sola parens Verbi puerpera,	b
Quae fuisti Evae reparatrix,	a
Viri nefas tuta mediatrix,	a
Illud clara luce dat scriptura.	b
Nata nati alma genitura.	b
Des, ut laeta musorum factura	b
Praevaleat hymnus, et sit ave,	c
Roborando sonos, ut guttura	b
Efflagitent, laude teque pura	b
Zelotica arte clamet ave.	c

Figure 1. *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix, prima pars* text

and Ockeghem. This Netherlandish style, according to musical analysts, was coupled with a growing influence of the Italian style, to which Josquin was exposed during his Milanese years, 1459–79.<sup>4</sup> Edgar H. Sparks also points out that the “constant hemiola” and “other rhythmic groupings which tend to cover the basic meter” are indicative of Josquin’s earliest work.<sup>5</sup> Myroslaw Antonowycz has provided extensive documentation of *prima pars* references to other Josquin works (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup>

### Secunda pars

In the *secunda pars* of the motet, no examples of borrowed materials appear, and the poetic structure changes (Figure 3). Rather than the two sentences found in the first part, the second part contains four. The first is set in four-measure antiphonal phrases, while the second is in irregular-length polyphonic phrases. The third sentence’s more homophonic phrases are less widely separated. The fourth sentence has the character of a litany: four

repetitions of identical musical material leading to the final Amen.

The *secunda pars* begins in *tempus imperfectum diminutum*, with the breve as the unit and the duration of the rests equal to each statement of the *cantus firmus* that follows. The *cantus firmus* is first stated four times in breves and six times in semibreves. At “Salve tu sola” the meter changes to triple, *sesquialtera* to the original, and the *cantus firmus* is stated eight times in semibreves. At “Ave Maria” the meter returns to duple (*proportio dupla* to the original), and the *cantus firmus* is stated eight additional times as breves, separated by rests of equal duration in this slower, final subsection.

The *secunda pars* is not in the Netherlandish style of the *prima pars*. Long ducts are replaced by short imitative passages, with three- and four-part “answers,” which presage the Venetian *cori spezzatti* style. Homophony is suggested at the change to triple meter, and *caesura*, in the Italian style, mark the ends of the sentences. Additionally, Richard Sherr contends that

while the first stanza’s music does not reflect the text, the music of the second part serves “both the structure and the meaning of the text.”<sup>9</sup>

### Later Analyses

Antonowycz, who continued Smijers’s collected edition of Josquin’s music, was at one time the only scholar questioning the early classification of this motet.<sup>10</sup> He contended that *Illibata* was an autobiographical work because of its conscious borrowing of melodic fragments from previous works. Sherr’s 1988 article provides further support for a later dating by relating *Illibata* to the Roman, five-voice tenor motet form that enjoyed a resurgence of interest among composers employed with Josquin by the Papal Chapel in the 1480s and 1490s—during his middle compositional period—but not in Milan in the 1460s and 1470s—his early period.<sup>11</sup> Sherr discusses the wholly different structure employed by Josquin in the second part.<sup>12</sup> Earlier musicologists recognized this disparity but attributed it to a lack of technical capabilities in an immature composer.<sup>13</sup> They may have propagated and perpetuated an error by assuming that certain style characteristics necessarily date a piece as composed during the time when those characteristics were current. As Sherr observes, “being archaic is not the same thing as being old.”<sup>14</sup>

Brown classifies Josquin’s motet *Ave Maria ... virgo serena* as having been written during Josquin’s middle years in Rome and Ferrara (c. 1480–1504).<sup>15</sup> The points of his *Ave Maria* analysis may be observed in *Illibata* and thus may place both works in this middle period (Figure 4).<sup>16</sup>

### Soggetto Cavato

The *soggetto cavato dalle vocali di queste parole* (subject carved from vowels of these words), in this case the one word “Maria,” unifies *Illibata*. Carving the vowels from the Virgin’s name, which is found in the fourth sentence of the *secunda pars*, and assigning solmization syllables with like vowel sounds to them, results in the melodic figure la-mi-la, untransposed and transposed in the soft hexachord as D–A–D and G–D–G. This three-note motive operates not only as a *cantus firmus* but also as an ostinato, especially in the *secunda pars*. Sherr states that the construction

	Approximate Composition Period
<i>Missa di dadi</i>	1459–85
<i>Missa faisant regretz</i>	1485–1504
<i>Missa l’homme armé super voces musicales</i>	1485–1504
<i>Missa la sol fa re mi</i>	1485–1504
<i>Missa Hercules dux Ferrariae</i>	1485–1504 <sup>7</sup>
<i>Memor esto verbi tui</i>	1498–1503 <sup>8</sup>

Figure 2. Josquin works quoted in *Illibata*

	Rhyme Scheme
Ave virginum decus hominum,	d
Coelique porta,	b
Ave lilium, flos humilium	d
Virgo decora.	b
Vale ergo, tota pulchra ut luna,	b
Electa ut sol, clarissima gaude.	c
Salve tu sola cum sola amica,	b
Consola “la mi la” canentes in tua laude.	c
Ave Maria, mater virtutum,	d
Veniae vena, ave Maria,	b
Gratia plena, Dominus tecum.	d
Ave Maria, mater virtutum.	d
Amen.	

Figure 3. *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix, secunda pars* text

“recalls the old isorhythmic motet.”<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between the *cantus firmus* and the other voices changes between the two parts of the motet. In the *prima pars*, the traditional treatment—notes of long duration in the tenor—differentiates the motive from the other voices. In the *secunda pars*, the *cantus firmus* appears in shorter note values similar to those of the contrapuntal voices. This treatment is generally equated with new compositional techniques of the early sixteenth century. The *soggetto cavato* ostinato, whose treatment varies extensively between the subsections of the motet, remains intricately integrated with the other voices throughout *Illibata*.

### Acrostic Theory

In 1925, over four hundred years after the composition of *Illibata*, Smijers became the first to notice an acrostic in the *prima pars* of the motet.<sup>18</sup> The first letters of successive lines read down spell “JOSQUINDPREZ.” The eighth line of the first stanza includes a mesostic which, when read across, spells “Des.” From the combination of the acrostic and the mesostic, the correct spelling of Josquin’s name may be ascertained: “JOSQUIN Des PREZ.” The “Des” is followed by an unusual comma in the text. Thus, it should be treated as a separate word and not elided, as has been a recent custom, to the following “Prez.”

Caldwell Titcomb details the history of attempts to solve the acrostic in the *secunda pars* and provides a possible solution (Figure 5). He constructs an acrostic of a place name, Escau, by restructuring the first four lines of the *secunda pars* into six. While his theory is interesting, it ignores a modified mesostic that exists in the eighth line of the *secunda pars* as originally formatted. Since a mesostic exists in the eighth line of the *prima pars*, retaining the original poetic structure preserves the symmetry of Josquin’s text. The eighth line of the second stanza is “Consola lami-la canentes in tua laude,” a fourteen-syllable line unequalled in length elsewhere in the motet. If one takes the first and last syllables of this line, the result is “Condé,” the site of Josquin’s final position as provost. As Titcomb and other scholars have noted, the acrostic created in the lines beginning “Electa,” “Salve,” “Consola,”

<i>Ave Maria</i>	<i>Illibata, prima pars</i> measure numbers	<i>secunda pars</i> measure numbers
each line has new music	1, 12, 18	83, 86, 89, 95
points of imitation	32–35	132–36
imitative paired duets	1–18	83–89
non-imitative paired duets	37–42	95–101, 150–58
homorhythmic style	57–67	125–28
overlapped entries of interlocked imitative sections	18, 23, 37	86, 92
important cadences from V to I sometimes after chordal sections	81–82 <sup>16</sup>	124 185–93

Figure 4. Comparison of style in *Ave Maria* and *Illibata*

Ave virginum	d
decus hominum,	d
Coelique porta,	b
Ave lilium,	d
flos humilium	d
Virgo decora.	b
Vale ergo, tota pulchra ut luna,,	b
Electa ut sol, clarissima gaude.	c
Salve tu sola cum sola amica,	b
Consola “la mi la” canentes in tua laude.	c
Ave Maria, mater virtutum,	d
Veniae vena, ave Maria,	b
Gratia plena,	b
Dominus tecum.	d
Ave Maria, mater virtutum.	d
Amen.	

Figure 5. *Illibata Dei virgo nutrix, secunda pars*, Titcomb’s reformatted text



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“Ave,” and “Veniae” results in “ESCAU,” which refers to the Escaut River. No writer has commented on the placement of the word “Conde” with the word “ESCAU.” The full name of this city is Condé-sur-l’Escaut—Condé on the Escaut. Even in Titcomb’s reformatting, it is interesting to note that the letters E-S-C-AU are to be found in the eighth line (Electa ut sol, clarissima gaude), and nowhere else, in the correct order horizontally.

## Numerical Theory

The alphabetical puzzles in *Illibata* exist amidst equally intriguing numerical constructions. Sherr notes that the Pythagorean proportions relating the meter signatures of Josquin’s motet match those in Busnois’s *Missa l’homme armé* (not the Chigi edition, the lesser known Roman edition that would have been available to the Papal singers by Josquin’s arrival in 1486). Josquin quotes the mass

extensively in *Illibata*. The motet could not have been composed prior to that date if the meter signature relationships are to be viewed as anything more than coincidental.<sup>19</sup>

Antonowycz notes Willem Elders’s recognition of the device of replacing letters in the Latin alphabet with numbers—*gematria*—to yield eighty-eight for “des Prez.”<sup>20</sup> This number matches the number of notes in the *cantus firmus* of the motet. “Josquin” yields ninety-nine, which represents nine multiplied by nine. The *cantus firmus* in the *prima pars* consists of nine notes, three statements of the three-note motive, each note lasting for nine breves. These nine notes multiplied by their duration equal eighty-one breves.<sup>21</sup>

## Condé Dating

A compilation of all the above arguments for dating *Illibata* in a later period is supported by other events. The motet was published in Petrucci’s 1508 volume of motets; prior to this *Illibata* was unknown, although Josquin was already a celebrated composer.

The numerous musical quotations in *Illibata* also argue for a later dating. It seems unlikely that this one motet, and only its *prima pars*, was the source of melodic material for so many of Josquin’s subsequent works. Rather, it must have been written after those works. Antonowycz believes that Josquin intended *Illibata* as “a survey of his melodic, *cantus-firmus*, and contrapuntal techniques” and asserts that the “work may be taken as an exhibition, a display of his style.”<sup>22</sup>

The solution to the puzzle of when *Illibata* was composed lies in determining the venue for which it was composed. In 1988 Albert Dehaine laid to rest the often-repeated misstatement that Josquin was born in Condé.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the motet’s acrostic reference to the city cannot have indicated an early biographical connection. Herbert Kellman notes that Josquin arrived in Condé by May 3, 1504, and remained in the cathedral’s employ there until his death in 1521.<sup>24</sup> Gottfried Göller states that this cathedral followed the custom of “almost all the cathedrals in northern France and Belgium [and was] dedicated to ‘Our Lady’.”<sup>25</sup> Both these authors, however, failed to apply an

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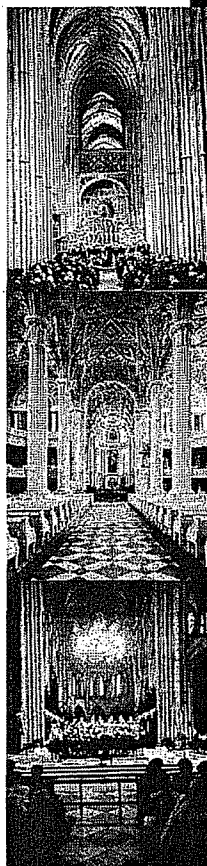
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important hierarchical distinction: the church in Condé was not a cathedral but a collegiate church.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it falls into the category of places where *Illibata*—with its peculiar textual reference to the pagan Muses—could be performed. In this locus, the puzzle of the motet's inappropriateness for cathedral worship is solved.

In deciding whether *Illibata* could have been composed during Josquin's last period, 1504 to 1521, one should consider the juxtaposition of the melodic quotations from Josquin's compositions at the end of the *prima pars* of the motet. Beginning at "et sit ave," they are *Missa la sol fa re mi / Missa l'homme armé super voces musicales*, *Missa Hercules dux Ferrariae*, and *Memor esto verbi tui*. Brown notes a possible *soggetto cavato* in the first example: *la, sol, fa, re, mi* may derive from the consonants of "lesse faire a mi," (leave it to me).<sup>27</sup> The next quotation names the Duke of Ferrara, in whose service Josquin worked as late as 1504. The final example, "remember your words," Brown considers to be a reminder to King Louis XII of promises made to the composer.<sup>28</sup> Its function in *Illibata*, however, also could be interpreted as a reminder of a promise of release from Ferrara's service. This speculation becomes useless if one is unable to date *Illibata* in the last era of Josquin's life.

Finally, further numerical analysis of the motet lends credence to a later dating. A count of the notes of the motet yields 1,505. If the work is autobiographical up to a certain point in Josquin's life, A.D. 1505 could be that point.

One must wonder what compelled Josquin to choose to review his life to that date. Titcomb's reformatting of the text of the *secunda pars* (Figure 5) results in the following acrostic: AD CA FLUV ESCAU GDAM (at the head of the river Escaut) and the acrostic phrase Gloria Dei ad majorem.<sup>29</sup> If one takes those letters and assigns the value of the appropriate Roman numerals, the result is as follows:

ADCAFLUV | ESCAUGDAM  
100 + 50 + 5 | 100 + 500 + 1000

In Titcomb's sixteen-line format, the first and second eight-line groupings subtotal 155 and 1,600, respectively. Since smaller Roman numerals subtract from those to their right (a fact ignored in

determining the second subtotal), the construction becomes 155 less than 1,600, or 1,445. The first two letters of the entire construction are AD, thus creating "A.D. 1445." Musicologists estimate Josquin's birthdate as c. 1440–45. If *Illibata* were written in 1505, perhaps it was to mark his sixtieth birthday.<sup>30</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Winfried Kirsch, "Josquin's Motets in the German Tradition," in *Josquin des Prez*:

<sup>2</sup> Brown, 122.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

*Proceedings of the International Josquin Festival-Conference*, ed. Edward E. Lowinsky (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 265; Edgar H. Sparks, *Cantus Firmus in Mass and Motet, 1420–1520* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 481; Howard M. Brown, *Music in the Renaissance* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), 122.

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